Value, Trauma, and the Future of Humanity

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1. Question: how does the future of humanity bear on the present value of the activities around which we organize our lives? Consider two scenarios:

Doomsday: You will live a normal life span, but the earth will be destroyed by an asteroid thirty days after you die.

Infertility: The human species has become infertile; everyone currently alive will live a normal life span, but there will be nobody who comes after us.

Scheffler's *Afterlife Conjecture*: under these conditions (especially *Infertility*), "people would lose confidence in the value of many sorts of activities, would cease to see reason to engage in many familiar sorts of pursuits, and would become emotionally detached from many of those activities and pursuits" (44).

2. The Afterlife Conjecture is a psychological hypothesis about how we would react to Infertility; concerns the attitudes of people toward the value of their conventional activities.

As commentators have observed, this is an empirical conjecture, which cannot be established definitively from the armchair (even an armchair that makes use of the resources of speculative fiction and cinema). Perhaps we wouldn't react in this way, or maybe only some of us would so react.

I want to grant, however, that the Afterlife Conjecture is correct, as a matter of psychological speculation. The question is: what follows from it?

3. Scheffler: the afterlife (i.e. the continued future existence of the species) matters to us more than our own personal existence into the future, because it is a condition of other things' mattering to us in a way personal immortality is not. But what is it for something to matter to us?

It is, in the first instance, a question of our attitudes: we care about things, or value them, in a way that involves a complex of normative beliefs, emotional vulnerabilities, and motivational tendencies. To value philosophical activity, for instance, is to take it to be a valuable form of disciplined inquiry; to find it engaging, in a way that leads one to care about pursuing it; to believe that people who have the requisite talent and opportunity have reason to study philosophy and engage in philosophical reflection; and to be

emotionally vulnerable to how things fare with the practice of philosophy. So our belief that there will be no afterlife would affect our ability to sustain this complex of attitudes toward the activities that fill out the lives that we actually lead.

Ultimately, though, this attitudinal claim is supposed to indicate something more surprising about the nature of value: that our conventional activities would no longer be valuable if there were no afterlife. Thus, not only would we "lose confidence" in the value of our activities in the Infertility scenario; we would be justified in doing so, because in the absence of a collective afterlife those activities would no longer be valuable in the ways we had previously taken them to be (51-3).

Scheffler: "the realm of value would be vastly reduced" (187); and this in turn would entail a drastic diminution of our capacity to live "value-laden lives". This is the key claim that he is making (sometimes obscured in his formulations, which are often ambiguous as to whether it is the value of our activities that would be affected in Infertility, or rather our ability to find value in them). But is the evaluative claim true?

4. A method of *reflective articulation*: when we attribute value to an activity, we should be able to articulate those features that make it valuable, in a way that coheres with and makes sense of our experience of its value. Conversely, when we lose our confidence in the value of an activity under new circumstances, we should be able to articulate how those circumstances affect the features that originally made the activity valuable. My claim: application of this method undermines Scheffler's conjecture. Consider some cases:

a. Experiential cases, including relief from severe pain; also friendship: Scheffler concedes that these would probably continue to matter to us in Infertility. Friendship is somewhat puzzling in this connection, since at least part of its value inheres in our shared participation in valuable activities with the friend, and there would allegedly no longer be such activities (as Scheffler notes, 54-5). Pleasure would presumably also be valuable; the conjecture is that it just isn't available much (in part because it presupposes, often, conviction in the value of the activities that produce it, something that has waned in people). Come back to the case of pleasure later.

b. On the other end of the spectrum, there are instrumental cases, including multi-generational goal-directed projects, e.g. cancer research or work on development of renewable energy sources, driverless automobiles, etc. Here, as Scheffler argues, the instrumental value is no longer available, since by hypothesis there will be no future generations around to complete the projects or to benefit from their results. *But*: even within such projects, there is much of value that is not instrumental, including intrinsically interesting technological and scientific discoveries, the satisfactions and stimulation of collegial interaction. And for many people, working in faceless corporations or bureaucracies, these more immediate values might be all that there is.

c. Intermediate cases, such as musical performance and enjoyment, creative and artistic activity, scholarly and scientific research (e.g. on Bulgarian military history or political philosophy), engagement with nature. These I think of as the central cases, and it is hard to articulate a good-making feature that would be undermined by the absence of an afterlife. Points:

*About the more experiential examples (music, literary pleasures, enjoyment of nature), Scheffler contends that the rewards these activities provide depend in complex ways on background attitudes, and that they can be blocked e.g. by "anxiety or impatience or preoccupation" (183). This is correct, but (i) pleasure or psychic rewards are not all that is valuable in these activities; and (ii) there is a deeper question of what background attitude would precisely block the rewards in these cases. Again, I'll return to this later.

*A different point is that some of these activities, e.g. scholarly research or creative activity, have a historical and social dimension; one is "a participant in a collective, temporally-extended project" (185). Yes, but this does not require the supposition that the collective activities, continuous with a historical practice, will necessarily continue on indefinitely into the future.

*Scheffler notes, finally, that we find value in participating in traditions, which have as their raison d'être that they are collective efforts to carry values forward into the future; also, that participating in such activities can help us to "personalize" our relation to the social world that will survive us. These are not values that would be possible under the Infertility scenario. Still, these seem to be secondary forms of value, which are parasitic on the idea that the activities that one is working to carry forward would be valuable in independent ways. There is no reason to think that those primary values, especially in the ones in category (c), would be undermined by the absence of an afterlife.

5. Upshot: the world of value would be perhaps "somewhat reduced" under Infertility, but not drastically. Much of what is actually valuable in the activities that currently sustain us would continue to be available, in principle, in the absence of the afterlife. And yet, I have agreed that the Afterlife Conjecture is plausible, as a psychological hypothesis.

This would be a situation of *trauma*: an abrupt change in our external situation makes it the case that we are no longer able to take value in activities that would in fact continue to be valuable if we engaged in them with gusto. Cf. P. D. James's descriptions of the reactions of people in *The Children of Men* as "a disease, with its soon-familiar symptoms of lassitude, depression, ill-defined malaise" (41). "Depression" seems especially apt, since it precisely involves a pathological inability take a sustained interest in activities and pursuits that remain valuable. The language of pathology would not be warranted if the reaction was a justified response to the loss of present value.

Of course, if one is depressed in these ways, then one will precisely fail to take pleasure in or to find rewarding many activities that are ordinarily profound sources of satisfaction. One will perhaps not be able to experience the rewards of music or literature or nature, where this in turn would reduce the range of values that are in fact accessible to one (putting out of reach certain experiential values).

But from a value-theoretic perspective, it is crucial that the explanation here cites a condition that is a form of psychic trauma or depression. Scheffler's contention is that the value of our present activities depends on the afterlife; it is our recognition of this prior evaluative dependency that justifies the attitudinal shift involved in the Afterlife Conjecture (i.e. our ceasing to value our activities). On the present interpretation, by contrast, the attitudinal shift precedes and causes the loss of a certain form of valuable activity (i.e. the experiential rewards of literature, music, nature, etc.). It is not a justified response to the dim perception that opportunities for valuable activity and experience have been lost under the Infertility scenario, but a pathological condition that blocks our psychic access to values that would otherwise still be fully available.

6. But if the Afterlife Conjecture involves a form of psychic trauma, how are we to explain this attitudinal reaction? Trauma is an emotional reaction to disaster; but what is the disaster that we would be responding to with trauma in this case? If the preceding argument is correct, it cannot be the loss of value in our present activities that is brought about, independently of our attitudes, by the recognition that there will not be an afterlife.

a. One possibility: to learn that there will be no afterlife would be wrenching, since the assumption that there will be forms the normal context of human activity. Scheffler emphasizes this point, suggesting that human life as a "thriving, ongoing enterprise" is the frame of reference for most of our ordinary assessments of what matters (including our conception of human life as a whole that is subject to assessment as good or bad: 43, 59-60). He suggests that the idea of something's mattering to us would lose its meaning in the absence of this framing conceptual context; but that seems overblown. Still, it would no doubt be shocking and disorienting to us to confront the falsity of an assumption about the context of our lives that we have previously taken for granted.

But this doesn't really account for the idea that the falsity of the assumption amounts to a disaster, a terrible development of the kind that might induce a form of trauma.

b. Second possibility: profound sense of loss, induced in us not by the diminution in the current value of our activities, but by the recognition that engagement with value will soon cease. That is the disaster to which we would respond emotionally with lassitude, depression, malaise.

Why is this experienced as a loss, if it is not a loss of value in our lives? Suggestion: it represents the loss of other things that we care about in leading value-filled lives for ourselves, specifically: (i) the future disappearance of the specific valuable practices and activities that we organize our own lives around; and (ii) the more abstract loss of any engagement with value, of the kind that constitutes the meaning of human lives. There is a "conservative" tendency in valuing things in our own lives that involves concerns of both kinds, for the continued existence of the specific values that we care about, and for the continued presence in the world of valuing.

Compare reactions you'd have to the prospect that the totality of human cultural attainments (art, music, literature, scholarship and scientific understanding) would be wiped out by a calamity thirty years after you are to die, never to be recovered; or that the human species survives, but only in a condition of painless, stupefied enslavement as a source of nourishment to an alien population. These scenarios would plausibly induce a similar reaction.

Why aren't we traumatized in the same way by the prospect of the eventual extinction of human life in the universe (the Alvy Singer Problem, 188-9)? Perhaps proximity makes a difference, just as it does in other cases of emotional trauma (it matters whether one has experienced or witnessed a catastrophe, or merely read about it online). Explanation: in virtue of our proximity to human extinction in the Infertility scenario, the imminent cessation of evaluative practices becomes a part of our own biography, in a way it isn't if it happens centuries after we die. We live its shadow.